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ABSTRACT

At-risk students who exhibit disruptive behavior need opportunities to fit into the traditional school setting. Teachers need to employ a progressive, cooperative approach in which these students are helped to acknowledge that their behavior is unacceptable. The profile of an at-risk student might include the following characteristics: hostility, few goals, expulsions from school, academic inferiority, transiency, and low self-concept. Teachers must understand the importance of feelings and create an atmosphere of open communication, honesty, and trust in order to foster in at-risk students an attitude of responsibility for their own actions and a willingness to bear the consequences for misbehavior. These youngsters must be given opportunities for success; they must learn that misbehavior is not beneficial and that cooperation is a more rewarding experience. Teachers can aid in building self-responsibility skills by: building self-esteem, building decision-making skills, rewarding responsible behavior, encouraging students to be accountable, including students in decision making, always showing respect, praising students' efforts, establishing achievable goals, assessing students' skills individually, and offering individualized instruction. (LL)

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"Promoting Self-Responsibility and Decision Making with At-Risk Students"

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Promoting Self-Responsibility
and Decision Making With
"At-Risk" Students

According to Hunter (1987), discipline is a process of assisting students to adjust to their environment and to develop acceptable inner controls. It involves a system of progressive training that develops qualities such as self-control, character, orderliness, efficiency, the acceptance of authority and the willingness to adhere to rules. Students who are considered "at-risk", often do not exhibit these qualities. Let's examine some of the qualities that "at-risk" students often possess that promote disruptive behavior.

Qualities of "At-Risk" Students

According to Hellison (1978), these students are turned off to the traditional school. They often are pre-delinquent, troubled, hostile youth with few goals. They are youth who have been expelled from school for a variety of reasons, are referrals from special schools, are from broken homes, are academically inferior and many times, are among the transients who attend many different schools. Often, these students possess a low self-concept, exhibiting an alienation to society with its rules and regulations. They are often ignored or pushed to the background and are only recognized when they initiate conflict or confrontation. They are programmed to fail and do fail because of how society views them.

Martinek, Crowe and Rejeski (1982) have developed a theory that helps explain the behavior of "at-risk" students. Labeled the 'pygmalion theory', this theory suggests that people will behave according to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which a person performs in accordance with the expectations of others. A child

will thus perform according to a teacher's expectations. If a teacher's initial reaction to a child is negative because of past biases or experiences, the initial relationship will be weak and will eventually perpetuate failure. In situations such as this, children are being stereotyped and the program fails without the teacher having an objective understanding of all the child's characteristics.

Glasser's Model

Glasser's model (1986) offers additional insight. He suggests that the teacher must work to foster personal bonds of trust with students. Glasser maintains that this trust is a prerequisite to honest, open communication between teachers and students.

Hellison (1978) supports this approach in his humanistic model. Rather than focusing on subject matter or content knowledge, Hellison stresses the person. This model places student self-esteem, self-actualization, self-understanding and interpersonal relations at the center of success in the schools. It serves as a means to alter the negative behavioral characteristics that "at-risk" students commonly possess and bring with them into the schools. This model includes the strengths of individualized instruction, along with a strong commitment to developing solid interpersonal relations through positive social transactions. The model stresses the importance of an individual's feelings and the value of long range outcomes with the individual student attempting to understand self through self-examination and open communication. Hellison's model encourages the search for personal identity to the extent that the culture and each individual's self-awareness allows. Therefore, as a means to assist students in becoming more self-aware, positive student-teacher relationships become essential in assisting "at-risk" students to grow and change behavior to become more successful in the schools.

Disruptive Behaviors of "At-Risk" Students

"At-risk" students often exhibit common disruptive behaviors. These include hostility, arrogance, aggressiveness, distrust of authority, expectation of failure and even open contempt for teachers and schools. Of course, we must remember that, to these students, all past experiences within the school environment have been dissatisfying They have enjoyed very few successes in the school environment.

It is interesting, though, that the the instructional methods employed by teachers often accentuate the social inadequacies of "at-risk" students, thereby creating opportunities for failure from the beginning. For example, in physical education, skill orientation is many times taught progressively with success at the later stages dependent upon success at earlier levels. Teachers of physical education also attempt to build motivation through an inherent belief that children like to play and generally enjoy activity. Because of their general social alienation and distrust of teachers and educational settings, "at-risk" youth resist common instructional models and aggressively challenge traditional teaching styles, and often do not possess "normal" developmental characteristics.

Considering the special problems "at-risk" youth bring to the gymnasium, a progressive, cooperative approach needs to be employed in which these students are helped to acknowledge that their behavior is unacceptable. As they accept responsibility for their behavior, they can then be given more responsibility which will enhance self-concept and feelings of personal worth.

Self-Responsibility and Decision Making

Consider yourself. As with most people, you react positively to an environment in which your accomplishments are recognized and your failures are minimized. These good feelings will eventually lead to a trusting relationship with those in authority. Therefore, the teacher must work to foster personal bonds of

trust with "at-risk" students. This trust will establish an environment of honest, open communication between teacher and students. By establishing a sense of trust, the teacher can lead the students to the point in which they can become more objective and make rational decisions.

The goal is to foster an attitude that students are responsible for their own actions and must bear the consequences of their misbehavior. The teacher will guide"at-risk" students to make a commitment to act in a responsible manner. In a sense, the teacher is leading the student to the point in which they can make an appropriate value judgement on the acceptability of their own behavior.

Given enough time, at risk students as with most students will come to the conclusion that misbehavior is not beneficial. A more rewarding experience results from cooperation rather than inappropriate behavior. In this approach, it is important for those in authority to recognize the worth and dignity of each individual. Through an interactive approach to shaping behavior that is built upon positive relationships, "at-risk" youth can be progressively integrated into traditional school settings with an opportunity to succeed.

Suggestions for Building Self-Responsibility

Building self-responsibility and decision making skills with disadvantaged youth requires extensive planning and coordinated efforts among all faculty within a school. There must be consistent reinforcement of acceptable behavior and a general plan to collaboratively eliminate disruptive behavior. The teachers involved should work as a team to change disruptive behavior. Staffing or team meetings scheduled at regular intervals or when the need arises will provide the opportunity to discuss incidences and solutions. To build decision making skills and responsible behavior with "at-risk" students, the following suggestions are offered:

(1) Build Self-Esteem. Use creative strategies and positive approaches in building a sense of self-worth. Everyone needs to feel worthwhile if they are to be in harmony with their environment and support group goals. Remember, attitudes and actions toward self and others are inseparable. If you believe in yourself, others will believe in you. As teachers, we need to help "at-risk" youth believe in themselves.

(2) Believe in Yourself as a Teacher. Believing in yourself as a teacher indicates that you have confidence that you can change the lives of your students for the better. Research indicates that high teacher self-efficacy is associated with improvements in student performance and improved student self-concept.

(3) Build Decision Making Skills. Start slow and progressively mold "at-risk" youth into being good decision makers. If students perceive that you believe in them, they will start believing in themselves. It is important for these students to believe they are capable of meeting the expectations of others satisfactorily.

(4) Attempt to Cultivate Outside Interests that Support In-School Activities. Everyone needs a balance. By engaging in outside activities, individuals are better able to put things in perspective. Of course, balance will vary from person to person, but recreational activities, exercise, clubs, etc., that promote positive experiences with other people will help "at-risk" youth bring appropriate attitudes to school and will assist these students in becoming a part of the mainstream.

(5) Reward Responsible Behavior. If a decision is made that shows responsibility, reward that decision. Praise the behavior and give that student opportunities to assume more responsibilities. This will motivate the student to continue to act in a responsible manner.

(6) Make Students Accountable. Students must be indoctrinated to the belief that they will be required to assume the final responsibility for the decisions they make. "At-risk" students often refuse to acknowledge this responsibility. If a

teacher can create a sense of responsibility with "at-risk" students, they will begin to act in a more responsible manner.

(7) Include Students in Decision Making. Start with small decisions and as students learn to be responsible, let them participate in larger class decisions. "At-risk" students need to feel that they are a part of the class. They will then feel a sense of responsibility to help establish the direction the class takes.

(8) Always Show Respect . Using inappropriate "power" strategies as a teacher, such as shaming, sarcasm, ridicule, etc., will only harm relationships and distill confidence. An attitude of respect should always be present in any relationship.

(9) Allow Student Choices. When students have met expectations and behaved responsibly, reward them. Let them make choices about activities or games. This will serve as motivation for continued responsible behavior.

(10) Praise their Efforts. Everyone wants to feel good about their efforts in reaching a goal. Praise accomplishments rather than criticizing failures.

Establishing "Success-Oriented" Goals

It is important to foster achievable goals with at-risk students. To do this, individual assessments should occur initially at the beginning of the semester to order to create an awareness of each student's psychomotor and cognitive levels. Using this information as a diagnostic tool, skill progressions based upon individual needs can be established. For example while teaching a unit in softball if the initial assessment indicates the student has immature throwing patterns, an intensive skill-specific program would be written to correct improper throwing mechanics. Realistic goals are created within reasonable time frames to provide opportunities for success but also opportunities for proper skill development. The student would be judged exclusively on their ability to reach these individually prescribed goals.

Make Students Accountable

As individual programs of improvement are developed, at-risk students should be made accountable for reaching prescribed goals. This would be done through a negotiation process in which the instructor and the student establish specific goals within a reasonable time frame for goal achievement. A contract could be written that specifies outcomes and time allotment but the student and the instructor formulate the terms together. The student would thus develop a sense of responsibility. Rewards for achieving the prescribed goals would also be written into the contract to provide a tangible result for goal attainment. A sense of student commitment to the goals of the contract would be developed but it also would promote an attitude of accountability.

Conclusions

"At-risk" youth can be successfully integrated into traditional school settings, but it takes time, effort and a willingness to foster relationships built upon trust and honesty. Responsible behavior and decision making skills can be developed systematically but it takes patience and understanding by those educators willing to take the risk.

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